

WORKING NOTE.
RESEARCH-PARTICIPATORY DIAGNOSIS-PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH.
1 June 2010

I. RESEARCH.

'Classical' research is mostly undertaken

- For academic purposes
- For policy purposes
- For marketing purposes.

Such different purposes will influence the focus of the research (e.g. a hypothesis or theory for academic purposes; various types of hard 'data' but also scenario modeling for policy purposes, data about consumer behaviour and preferences for marketing purposes...). Yet there are also a number of commonalities in this type of research:

- ▶ The questions being asked are determined by others than those whose answers will be sought;
- ▶ It is extractive i.e. the insights gained are taken away from those who provided answers and generally provided to who demanded the research;
- ▶ It treats the 'interlocutors' as objects in the research;
- ▶ It claims to be 'objective' but is blind to the choices that are made (see below)
- ▶ The interpretations and/or recommendations are those of the researchers or 'experts', not necessarily those of the people who were 'researched'.

In short, in 'classical' research people and their views, opinions, priorities, preferences and behaviours are 'being researched' for the benefit of someone else - who might be taking decisions possibly influenced by the results (an interpretation of the 'results') of the research.

(The rest of this note will no longer look at research for marketing purposes, as the broader context of this learning event is one of peacebuilding.)

II. PARTICIPATORY DIAGNOSIS.

A 'participatory diagnosis' is already a different way of identifying and understanding 'the problem'. 'Participatory diagnosis' is a deliberate effort to seek out the views of people on what is going well and what is not going well, what might be major problems and stumbling blocks for the medium-term future, but also what are things that bind people together and provide common ground.

Forms of 'participatory diagnosis' occur in a context of participatory 'conflict mapping', participatory 'issue-mapping', participatory 'actor-analysis' etc.

'Participatory diagnosis' therefore is already different from 'classical research' in that the fundamental 'question' is not pre-determined. Rather, people engage in a broad-based listening exercise to try and understand how a diverse set of interlocutors perceive a current situation in general or a specific issue more particularly. It recognizes that perceptions and

not necessarily 'objective facts' to a significant degree shape social and political dynamics. It also recognizes that it is better to first gain a better understanding of 'what lives among the people' and 'how' it lives among them, before formulating the key questions that can shape more in-depth inquiry.

'Participatory diagnosis' can be pursued to verify

- Whether the understanding of the issues by the policy- and decision-makers corresponds to how a population at large (or a sub-group of a population) sees them;
- How policies and practices intended to address and resolve certain issues are actually perceived by those who are affected by them; are they effective, are they working well?
- Whether there are important issues that shape the social and political dynamics that the policy- and decision-makers fail to acknowledge.

The quality of the participatory diagnosis will depend on

- How wide the participation is i.e. the geographical and socio-political spread of those consulted;
- How wide the scope of the diagnostic exercise is: is it a fairly open process that seeks to elicit people's views on the full spectrum of all major problems and things that go well, or does it focus on a more specific set of problems (e.g. social and economic)?;
- How deep the diagnosis goes: do people just 'list' major problems, or do they unpack them into more detail, and reflect on how different issues link into and reinforce each other to create a vicious or virtuous circle?
- Whether there are attempts at prioritizing the problems?

Participatory diagnosis does not need a 'hypothesis' to research – it can go with an open mind and ear. Its 'results' are not used to 'develop theory'. Neither are they directly relevant for policy. Even if they would signal that a certain policy is not working i.e. the problem is perceived to persist and perhaps even get worse, there is probably not enough in-depth analysis of why a given policy is not working well, let alone recommendations of what a better policy should look like.

The people conducting a participatory diagnosis exercise will not present a report with the 'facts' and their analysis and interpretation of it. Instead they will present a fair account of 'what they heard'. If there are diverse views, then their 'report' will retain the diversity of views, precisely because diversity of views is what will be influencing the social and political dynamics.

It is probably quite premature at this stage to also add 'recommendations', even if it would only be recommendations that have come from the people they listened to. After all, these

recommendations may not have been sufficiently thought-through – and more importantly, will not necessarily have any broad support because there has probably not been a process of deeper and prolonged debate and dialogue for people with different views to come to greater consensus.

If there are any recommendations then, these can better pertain to the continuation of the process (“What next?”) rather than to substantive action regarding the real issues identified.

III. PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH.

PAR is unlike ‘classical’ research: Participatory Action Research or PAR is said to be very different from ‘classical research’. It definitely requires ‘participatory diagnosis’ but also goes well beyond it.

“The ‘research’ aspects of PAR attempt to avoid the traditional ‘*extractive*’ research carried out by universities and governments where ‘experts’ go to a community, study their subjects, and take away their data to write their papers, reports and theses. Research in PAR is ideally BY the local people and FOR the local people. Research is designed to address specific issues identified by local people, and the results are directly applied to the problems at hand.” (Wikipedia April 2010)

“Unlike most other research techniques, participatory methods place extensive emphasis on the importance of harnessing the non-academic, local knowledge of the people themselves in order to act upon and solve local problems. Power, assumed to rise from the production and control of knowledge, is then transferred from societal elites to those whose voice is often not heard: those on the periphery of decision-making processes.” (Bowd et alii 2010:2).

Not another ‘methodology’: PAR is not just ‘another methodology’. It is inspired by a social philosophy that sees the production and control of knowledge as a dimension in power relations, be it the power of the researcher, the “expert”, the policy maker, or in general the ‘decision-maker’. Powerful actors can shape and dominate what should be discussed and how, what is recorded, highlighted or censored etc. PAR was developed also as a critique to the formal, expert driven, top-down ‘development’ projects (Bowd et alii 2010:5/7)

PAR is done by “researchers who have come to understand the practical and ethical implications of the inevitability of the value-driven and action-effects of any type of research, consultation or inquiry, that is:

- the effects of raising *some* questions and not others,
- the effects of involving *some* people in the process and not others,
- the effects of observing *some* phenomena and not others,
- the effects of making *this* sense of it and not alternative senses, and
- the effects of deciding to take *this* action (or ‘no’ action) as a result of it rather than any other action and so on.

All research involves these kinds of decisions. Participatory action research attempts to make these decisions more consciously and in relation to more clearly-worked out purposes, and using more appropriate designs and techniques for exploring them.” (Wadsworth 1998)

PAR therefore wants to

- ▶ Dignify people, treating them as intelligent actors with a lot of relevant knowledge and good ideas, not just as respondents to instruments of research;
- ▶ Encourage and empower people to take action to transform their practices and realities.

Power over and power to: Participation relates to power. Power depends on information, money, social status, knowledge, confidence, skills or a mixture of those. There are those who resist participation because they equate it with 'loss of control'. But there is a fundamental difference between 'power over' and 'power to'. In the context of 'power to' achieve something, to realize something, 'participation' can bring great added value.

PAR aspires to be research 'for the people and by the people', research whose objective is action.

In annex there is a – simple- example to illustrate what sort of differences you may get when 3 people inquire into the same question i.e. why do communities not trust and collaborate with the local police.

THE GENERAL PURPOSE OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH.

"Participatory action research (PAR) is a method of research where creating a positive social change is the predominant driving force. (...) Participatory action research can be defined as "collective, self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social...practices" (quotation from Kemms and McTaggart 1988:5)." Seymour-Rolls & Hughes 2000

"Essentially Participatory Action Research (PAR) is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts which make sense of it. (...) Participatory action research is not just research which is hoped that will be followed by action. It is action which is researched, changed and re-researched, with the research process by participants." (Wadsworth 1998)

"I regard action research as a methodology which is intended to have both action outcomes and research outcomes." (Bob Dick – Beginners' Guide).

"The actions have a set goal of addressing an identified problem..." (Wikipedia)

"It is a collaborative method to test new ideas and implement action for change."

"PAR is an approach to improving social practice by changing it and learning from the consequences of change." (McTaggart 1989)

"The methodology is concerned with the transformation of existing activities to try to bring about changes which people in the situation regard as improvements." (IIED 1994)

"Participatory inquiry is a structured methodology centred on the principle that participation is a moral right, in which multiple perspectives are sought through a process of group inquiry, developed for the specific context, and so using systematic methods to help people organize to bring about changes in problem situations that they see as improvements." (IIED 1994)

PAR's added value: The desire to give those people who have less power not only a stronger voice, but to also increase their confidence that they can be actors themselves for change, doesn't mean that PAR has to be a threat to the authorities. It's mobilization of people, their knowledge and insights, their ideas, their efforts and commitments can be extremely constructive and be of great benefit to those who have the responsibility to manage public affairs.

PAR has the potential to bring added value in various ways:

- ▶ Enhanced relevance of the inquiry to those whose jobs are to do something about the problem (whether as a service provider, a carer, an administrator, a funder etc.)
- ▶ Generating more and creative ideas about what to do to change and improve
- ▶ Greater relevance, creativity and effectiveness of the new actions decided-on
- ▶ Commitment to observing the new actions and acting on and researching them further
- ▶ Perceived legitimacy of the decisions made and actions pursued because of the process by which the proposals have been generated.

Can PAR deliver on these aspirations? But PAR has also met with skepticisms of different nature.

- ▶ Is it really 'serious' enough as a methodology?

PAR has been criticized for lacking the methodological rigor and technical validity that is the standard of much academic research. Supporters, however, counter that sacrificing some level of methodological and technical rigor is not only necessary if the research design wants to be collaborative and adaptive, but also is well worth the additional validity and practical significance that is gained through a PAR approach. Additionally, many academic supporters would assert that there are ways to conduct PAR that is sound by academic standards. (Wikipedia – accessed April 2010)

- ▶ Can it really fulfill such expectations?

Can real participation ever be achieved? There remain significant obstacles to many people participating meaningfully.

Does participation in the development of knowledge result in more and other voices being heard? And if they are heard, does it change anything in what choices are made, and what is decided?

Does 'participation' really evolve into 'emancipation' – gains in knowledge, awareness and confidence that encourage people to themselves take action to change their circumstances?

Even if people have gained greater insight and reached a certain consensus, will they have the capacities (time, skill, structures, financial resources) to follow through and implement? Or will there be a lot of ideas waiting to be acted upon? (Schaff & Greenwood 2003)

Sources drawn upon.

Bowd, R., A. Özerdem and D. G. Kassa 2010: A Theoretical and Practical Exposition of Participatory Research Methods. In A. Özerdem & R. Bowd (eds.): Participatory Research Methodologies. Development and Post-disaster/Conflict Reconstruction. Farnham, Ashgate pp. 1-18

Schaff, K. & D. Greenwood 2003: The Promises and Dilemmas of Participation. Action research, Search Conference Methodology and community development. In Journal of the Community Development Society 34(1): 18-35

Wadsworth, Y. 1998: What is Participatory Action Research
(<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html>)

Wikipedia 2010: Participatory Action Research
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participatory_action_research) accessed April 2010

	PROBLEM: COMMUNITIES NO TRUST IN POLICE- NO COLLABORATION	
'EXPERT RESEARCH'	PARTICIPATORY DIAGNOSIS/ANALYSIS	PARTICIPATORY ACTION-RESEARCH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to police chief • Talk to senior official Ministry Interior • Talk to some police officers • Review police training curriculum • Talk to a few local authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to actors in previous column but also • More in-depth discussions with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Police agents - Some formal and informal community leaders - Ordinary people in community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth discussion with actors suggested in previous columns but not only on the 'problem analysis' • In-depth discussions also on possible solutions: ideas are requested from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Senior police chiefs - Police agents - Local authorities - Local leaders - Ordinary local people • The various ideas and proposals are examined by the various groups for the practicality, and likely impact • Ideally a consensus emerges around a set of proposals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draws up expert report • Expert makes recommendations to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Police chief - Minister of Interior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draws up expert report • Expert makes recommendations to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Police chief - Minister of Interior - Local authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report with agreed recommendations for action by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Police authorities - Police agents - Local authorities / local leaders - Wider local public

This is an imaginary example to illustrate a point. Variations on these scenarios are possible.

